Why I Am Not a Public Theologian

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Abstract

Insofar as public theology is one of several contextual theologies in the world that is focused on and limited to specific contexts, its raison d'être may be understandable. But we argue that if or since public theology has ambitions to become a totalizing and global theological methodology – a ready-made frame to be adapted to and adopted in various contexts – we shall, in this article, unmask and interrogate the unspoken imperial ambitions of global public theology. We will use Black and African theologies to evaluate it. In this article, we argue that the context in which Black and African theologies are done is too important for them to be buried under generalized and seemingly context-less notions of public theology. To this end, we will sketch a few issues that define the context in which Black and African theologies are being done today. These include doing theology not at the helm but in the shadow of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, doing theology in the midst of violence, and doing theology in a manner that does not minimize the painful history of the continent of Africa. In closing, we will propose a theological agenda for Black and African theologies at this time.

Keywords: public theology, Black theology, African theology, African religion, violence, poverty, Fourth Industrial Revolution

A Beauty Pageant of Theologies

Instead of a comprehensive review of European and North American public theology in the world, this article subjects global public theology to scrutiny against criteria that are salient to Black and African theologies.[1] This is in light of some of the claims and aims of European and American public theology. Having been a mildly interested observer of public theology over the past few years, I am no objective reviewer of it.

Another reason for my cautious diffidence is that in my short life in theology, torrential rains of new theologies have fallen on me every few years. These theologies have come at me adorned in colourful robes and dazzling jewels: each singing the praises of its own name, each promising to surpass the one before it, each promising to be better connected to the true sources of theology, each doing its best to hide its imperial intentions. These include prophetic theology,[2] contextual theology,[3] reconstruction[4] theology,[5] enacted theology,[6] white theology,[7] as well as a range of "beyond" and "toward" theologies, that is, theologies seeking to take us beyond our contemporary theological trajectories, toward all manner of supposedly better theologies.

Having been raised in this context of a beauty pageant of theologies, I have had to work hard to maintain my own theological sanity, often gasping for air while desperately searching my missionary-translated Bible[8] for solace and consolation.[9] The addition of what Peter Matheson once described as "a relatively new animal"[10] on the theological scene, namely

public theology, to my already full plate of theology types, gave me a particularly debilitating kind of disease – some of whose symptoms I shared eight years ago.[11]

Refusing to Engage

Except in situations where I have been forced to read public theology, such as when I had to read Lesslie Newbigin[12] as a student or when I had to respond to a public theology paper at conferences, I have continued to rely on my various strategies of "refusing to read"[13] – much like Musa Dube's refusal to read Alexander McCall Smith[14] for as long as she possibly could. There is, therefore, a sense in which this essay is one more exercise in the art of refusing to engage. But given the constant avalanche of experimental theologies, it is not easy to completely evade one or the other of them.

As a student in the United States, I almost sat at the feet of George Hunsberger,[15] one of the first generation of public theologians. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he arrived as I was leaving Western Theological Seminary, in Holland, Michigan. But before I left, Hunsberger shared his passion for the work of British missiologist Lesslie Newbigin[16] and was introduced to us as the founding coordinator of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America – an early proponent of one of the earliest forms of public theology in that context.

A few years later, South African missiologist David Bosch published his monumental book, *Transforming Mission*.[17] A key idea in that book is what Bosch described as an emerging "postmodern paradigm of Christian mission." Through this idea, Bosch inadvertently acted as an inspiration for some of those in the first generation of public theology enthusiasts. Based on this idea, some Bosch readers created the impression that the whole world of Christian mission was moving resolutely in one direction, toward being a postmodern mission paradigm. It was as if this postmodern mission paradigm would be the culmination of all mission paradigms before it.

To be fair to Bosch, his emerging mission paradigm was far less totalitarian and certainly less grandiose than some of his readers surmised. He posited a view of mission that was multidimensional, opting as he did for a "mission as" approach rather than a "mission is" formula. Through his approach, Bosch was able to incorporate several theologies and practices of churches and theologies in the global South in his proposed missiological paradigm. In a posthumous consideration of Bosch's work, two of his closest and most trusted colleagues, the late Willem Saayman and Klippies Kritzinger, concluded that the nub of his *Transforming Mission* was his passionate plea that Christian mission should henceforth be conducted in "bold humility."[18]

It seems that some readers of Bosch went too far and read too much into his notion of a postmodern paradigm of mission. If anything, Bosch suggested this paradigm as one in which Christian mission and, by extension, Christian theology should be humbler and more open to the many ways in which mission was being carried out in the world, especially in the lives of the "younger churches."

Neither the postmodern nor the post-Christian contexts should be presumptively imposed on all of Christian theology, all theologians, all Christianities,[19] and all contexts. The very idea of a post-Christian, even a postmodern, era, while meant as an expression of acceptance of the new and inevitable change, could also be an unspoken hankering after the very reality that comes after the hyphenation – the modern era, the Christian era, an era in which all societal

myths and metaphors derived from a Christian narrative one way or the other. This may explain my reluctance to join any voyage in search of some past Christendom, pristine or not pristine. I refuse to join any expedition in search of some amalgamated theological agenda for the entire world, packaged for a neatly designed "general public."

I understand the desire of public theology to engage with the social, political, and spiritual issues of the day. All progressive theologies should do that. All socially engaged theologians should do that. But we have a duty to be cautious of the often unstated imperial ambitions in public theology, its penchant for the elimination of difference, such as its predilection to slot the liberation theologies into its own ready-made frames, as well as its tendency, conscious or unconscious, to eliminate the agency of the practitioners of theologies that operate on the margins.

I have previously noted with dissatisfaction William Storrar's depiction of the public square as a place where human beings encounter one another as strangers, but also a place where they must be encouraged to "seek to treat one another with civility, recognizing one another as fellow citizens and human beings even in our profound differences of identity and outlook."[20] This is how I framed my objection to Storrar:

> Our differences are not only soft but hard, not (only) horizontal but vertical. It is not merely that some are men and others are women, but rather that men are gods and women their dispensable temptresses; not merely that some are white while others are black, but rather that whites are masters and the blacks are servants; not merely that some like wine while others like beer, but rather that some have much to eat and drink while others have nothing; not that some believe in hell and others believe in heaven but rather that some live already in heaven while others live already in hell.[21]

For these reasons and more, Black and African theologies should neither be confused with public theology nor allow themselves to be swallowed up by it. The mandate of Black and African theologies is deeper, sharper, and straighter. More than the propositional idea of making the gospel a public truth, Black and African theologies have the task of making the human, the women, the Black and the African a public truth. For Black and African theologies, therefore, truth is a human being. More than seeking to merely reinstate some past narratives of Christendom, Black and African theologies point an accusing finger at these, seeking to deconstruct rather than merely reconstruct them. In my view, therefore, public theology is too nice and too neat for the dirty, smelly, messy, chaotic contexts of Africa.

African Public Theology?

It was only a matter of time before public theology would follow in the infamous footsteps of similarly imperial theologies of the past – imperial in their desire to annex, possess, homogenize, and globalize. As stated earlier, the imperial ambitions and the homogenizing designs of such theologies are almost never stated upfront.

There is within South Africa a strong public theology lobby centred on the University of Stellenbosch and its theology postgraduate students, a sizeable number of whom hail from other parts of the African continent. That lobby plays a key role in the Global Network of Public Theology (GNPT), ostensibly as an informal representative of the African continent. During the 2016 GNPT conference at Stellenbosch University, Nigerian theologian Sunday B. Agang felt challenged when book publisher Isobel Stevenson said to him, "I need someone

to give me a book on African public theology." Four years later he, together with two Stellenbosch colleagues, co-edited the first such book – titled *African Public Theology*[22] – comprising 30 chapters by authors from several African countries, with nearly half hailing from Nigeria.

Framing his essay as a response to the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, a long-term plan for the development of the continent, Agang describes African public theology as "a Christian theology that is concerned with how all aspects of human knowledge, understanding and faith in God can translate into a deep moral commitment to building a better society, one which is strong in faith, love, justice and wisdom."[23]

In his contribution, Dion Forster follows Dirkie Smit in suggesting that the mandate of African public theology is "to reflect on the meaning, significance and implications of faith in and for public life"[24] ; therefore, argues Forster, African public theology should be interdisciplinary, biblical, multilingual, prophetic, able to provide political direction, and intercontextual. Before signing off, Forster marches his African public theology into the theological beauty pageant to which I referred earlier, thus revealing, albeit inadvertently, the imperial ambitions of his African public theology. Apparently, his African public theology should do far better and far more than theology produced by Black and African theologians for the past century, because his African public theology will not

> limit the scope of their theology to a particular geographical context (Africa), or a particular historical experience (liberation from colonialism, or apartheid), or a particular ethnicity or culture. Such limitations may hinder the ability of African Christians to share their theologies, experiences and discoveries with other Christians around the world. The result might be that Africa develops its own form of "private" theology (private to Africa, or to Black Christians) rather than making its own contribution to global public theology.[25]

This is an astounding misunderstanding of Black and African theologies. If allowing the geographical context of Africa to inform one's theology is a fatal limitation, why does *African* public theology include "Africa" in its name at all? For whom, then, is the notion of "*African* public theology" intended if the real deal is *global* public theology? It may be understandable that as a white male South African, Forster may not fully appreciate the devastation caused by colonialism and apartheid on his fellow Africans. It is unfortunate that Forster seems to take it upon himself to actively prescribe that African public theologians should not "limit" the scope of their theology to Africa and to liberation from colonialism or apartheid. Therein lies the mirage of global public theology. It can easily degenerate into a smokescreen inside of which a hundred years of Black, feminist, and African theologies may be killed softly and obliterated out of history.

To be fair to Forster, toward the end of his article, he does say, rather belatedly and almost reluctantly of Black, feminist, and African theologies, that "we are not in competition with these theological traditions and their approaches to specific experiences or concerns."[26] But he remains unrepentant in his imperial intentions when he suggests, on behalf of global public theology, that as far as Black, African, and feminist theologies are concerned, "our aim should be to include the best of what we can learn from them."[27]

I am unable to see the wisdom of any theology that bears the name of the continent of Africa – worse still, by Africans – if that theology also seeks to sweep aside more than a century of

theological reflections by fellow Africans. I raised the same concerns in my review of Emmanuel Katongole's *Born from Lament*[28] and in an earlier article.[29] It may be too much to expect that the theological beauty pageant to which I referred earlier will stop anytime soon. But global public theology should at least become conscious of its imperial ambitions that set it not merely in competition but in opposition with local theologies. It should become conscious of its unspoken or even unconscious desire to efface and trivialize local agency and of its desire to become the one and only representative of all voices, in all places and all times.

Doing Theology from the Scrap Heap of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Less than a hundred thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* were one among several animal species roaming the African rain forests,[30] navigating the Congo and Zambezi, harnessing the fortunes that came with the seasonal floods of the Nile river. Over the centuries, *Homo sapiens* were to prove to be the most innovative of animals, when it came to the quest for freedom. It is therefore reasonable to submit that perhaps the human quest for freedom started on the mother continent, the African continent. For this reason, the late South African musician and anthropologist Johnny Clegg suggested, in a song by that title, that all human beings are "Scatterlings of Africa."[31] This historical reality is an important reason why we should not allow African thought to be minimized and trivialized the way some practitioners of theologies such as global public theology attempt to do. We say this while fully aware that the African person is among the bottom rank of humanity in terms of human rights, disease burden, poverty, and life expectancy – this at a time of change and great prosperity concentrated among a few in the world.

In terms of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) that is apparently upon us,[32] human beings may be defined, much like their fellow machines, as bundles of data and algorithms, unfavourably competing with supercomputers, artificially intelligent computers, and other super algorithms. As the human gods[33] join forces with their machine counterparts, new tribes of surplus people may be created, if they haven't been created already.

In an interview titled "How to Think of Empire," celebrated Indian author Arundhati Roy makes some chilling comments about the cultural and socio-economic implications of the confluence of new 4IR technologies:

> New technology could ensure that the world no longer needs a vast working class. What will then emerge is a restive population of people who play no part in economic activity – a surplus population if you like, one that will need to be managed and controlled. Our digital coordinates will ensure that controlling us is easy. Our movements, friendships, relationships, bank accounts, access to money, food, education, healthcare, information (fake, as well as real), even our desires and feelings – all of it is increasingly surveilled and policed by forces we are hardly aware of. How long will it be before the elite of the world feel that almost all the world's problems could be solved if only they could get rid of that surplus population? If only they could delicately annihilate specific populations in specific ways – using humane and democratic methods, of course. Preferably in the name of justice and liberty. Nothing on an industrial scale, like gas chambers or Fat Men and Little Boys. What else are smart nukes and germ warfare for?[34]

To urge African theologians not to allow their African context and experiences to inform and determine their theological orientation may be a theological strategy that may succeed in "getting rid" of the "surplus populations" and the seemingly dispensable theologies and spiritualities. As if African people were solely to blame for their "particular" historical experiences! As if Africans can simply move on and leave these historical experiences behind so that they make their "own contribution to global public theology"![35]

It seems that the price for entry into the hallowed corridors of global public theology includes the performance of rituals that involve Africans "moving in circles" in order "to make them forget their land, their homes, their kinfolk, and even the very occupations they once knew – in short, forget their former existence, wipe their minds clean of the past and be receptive of the stamp of strange places."[36] Such a price is too high to pay.

In fact, it is not only too early but simply too wrong for Africans to choose the route of amnesia when it comes to slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. If we do not continue to reflect theologically on the implications and the legacies of these experiences, then we have nothing to say to the world, theologically or in terms of history.

In his latest novel, *The Freedom Artist*, Nigerian writer Ben Okri gives us not only a peep into the look and feel of *unfreedom*, but a vision of the hell in which many Africans may be living today.[37] The setting of his novel is a world or country whose founding myths are actively prohibited, as the citizens are forced to forget these in case some of them rekindle their thirst and search for freedom. In that country, all thinking, all creativity, all question asking, all reading, all writing, and all books are banned and prohibited. The few approved artists and writers toe the line set for them by the rulers of the land. Their job is to introduce and promote newer and more frivolous myths and art forms that keep the people entertained but not empowered to act as agents. These restrictions carry on for several generations, until the vast majority of citizens forget the arts of thinking, reading, writing, book printing, and book making. As if these restrictions were not enough, the citizens of this country, who sleepwalk day and night, are also subjected to compulsory wailing.

But a tiny minority of citizens resisted subversively and bravely. By night they put up graffiti carrying treasonous messages that mysteriously invoke the forbidden myth, urging citizens to wake up and rebel. As the resistance movement begins to grow, the ruling hierarchy becomes nervous, angry, and more vicious. To put down the rebellion and prevent it from spreading, a special police task force is established. It is a cannibalistic force that literally devours the protesters. Whenever the cannibalistic police force engages in eating up the unruly masses, the rich and their children join in on the acts of cannibalism. Many are eaten up to death. Some escape with deep wounds and missing limbs. In this way, Ben Okri paints a horrific picture of a world in which human beings are not only bereft of freedom, but lacking in dignity, deficient in their sense of purpose – people reduced to a state of uselessness, a world full of "surplus people," at the mercy of what Okri calls the ruling Hierarchy.

After I finished reading Ben Okri's book, I wondered what kind of theological response would be possible to the hellish situation in which the citizens of that imaginary land lived. For my theological tools, sources, resources, and interlocutors in dealing with this situation, I would not go to global public theology. For help, I would look to Black, African, and feminist theologies. In fact, I would argue that for a long time, South African Black theology[38] of liberation has been trying to respond to situations akin to Ben Okri's vision of hell on earth.[39]

Admittedly, the world we live in today contains several hellish countries, places, and contexts. In many such countries, the neat divide between the public and the private is not helpful. Sometimes, theology has to be done not from the mountaintop of dreams and visions about the Africa and the world we wish for, never mind what the AU Agenda 2063 says, but from the vantage point of hell – that is, from the point of view of the non-persons of the 21st century.

Such are the interlocutors of Black and African theologies. Its interlocutors are they who end up in so-called refugee camps in Libya, Turkey, or Europe – or, worse still, they end up dead on the seashore. These are not merely undocumented, they are new surplus people: jobless, stateless, "soulless," and treated as if they were undeserving of any dignity. These are the women on whose bodies wars are being fought in Uganda, Sudan, and the Congo. Such are the interlocutors of Black and African theologies. It is alongside such people that African theologies must be done. With them and on their behalf, African theologies must "wrestle with God."[40] For such people, human rights are generally not within reach, despite all the platitudes about rights and responsibilities, if only because they are, essentially, not counted among the human.

Black and African theologies are therefore theologies of lament in situations where the states are so weak and sometimes so despotic that there is no public/private binary to speak about.

Doing Theology from inside a "Shithole"

So, here I am, bringing you greetings on behalf of what former US President Donald Trump has called the "shithole countries" of the world.[41] Twenty-six years ago, I acquired the citizenship of one such country – South Africa. That was after the people of the country shook off the shackles of apartheid – or at least seriously attempted to do so. Contrary to what Dion Forster suggests African theologians should do, I am not about to forget the context in which I do theology. Although I have existed in my "shithole country" since I was born, that country was never mine, and vice versa. For a quarter of a century now, I and that country have been learning to know each other. We are working on it. In time, we may learn to love one another. We are not there yet.

And in time, the citizens of El Salvador, Haiti, Palestine, Syria, Mexico, and African countries, as well as Indigenous peoples and women in general, may cease to be the target of vile attacks from the likes of Trump and populist politicians like Duterte, Wilders, Perry, and Le Pen.[42] But not yet. For now, to be a citizen of one of Trump's shithole countries, and to be African, is to be regarded differently and treated mainly in sub-human ways. But alas, the sub-human treatment comes not merely from the likes of Trump, but from within Africa itself.[43]

From inside the squalor of their makeshift habitats, whether it be in Kibera outside Nairobi, the City of the Dead outside Cairo, Kisenyi outside Kampala, Darhavi outside Mumbai, Khayelitsha outside Cape Town, or in any of the world's slum cities (where the majority of humanity lives), theology must be done. In these contexts, where the private versus public binary has long since collapsed, where the rich eat the poor and the poor eat the poor, Black, feminist, and African theologians must seek the face of God. And this must be done in dialogue and in contestation with the many churches of the squatter camps. Some of these churches experiment with violent patriarchies,[44] nihilistic survival tactics,[45] spiritualities of humiliation,[46] miracle making,[47] and violence.[48] Black, feminist, and African theologies are

done in the midst of people who are daily *dancing in the glory of monsters*.[49] These are the people who live in never-ending war situations, in states that are so weak they do not deserve the name; in situations where nothing works, from the water tap to the local police station, so that the people suffer repeated and multiple losses – loss of future, loss of community,[50] loss of humanity, and loss of God. Such is the context in which Black, feminist, and African theologies must be carried out. In such situations, Black and African theologies must prophesy against despotic rulers at home and abroad. Part of the task of these theologies is to cut through the political rhetoric and developmentalist bluster, complete with graphs and charts, which do not change the conditions in which the poor live.

In my own country of South Africa, politicians wax lyrical about their many achievements since democracy. Indeed, haven't they done well for themselves? If it is not about their many achievements for which the citizens are required to show gratitude and appreciation, they harangue the population with their plans for the next three, four, five, or eight years. And yet, to date, we still have in South Africa, effectively, Black residential areas and white residential areas, white universities and Black universities, white schools and Black schools. Just because some Black people have gained entry into these white enclaves does not make these enclaves less white in culture and leadership (styles). Instead we must ask ourselves, how many times did the admitted Black people have to move in circles, and how many "crimes" of forgetting did they have to commit before they were admitted and in order to be able to stay admitted?

Like a hastily made and overused garment, the rainbow nation/notion of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela is unravelling before our eyes. None other than the children[51] and grandchildren of the struggle veterans are leading the charge in debunking the myth of a rainbow people.[52] Indeed, the very roles of the likes of Tutu and Mandela in the transition have recently come under fire from various quarters. Their renowned moral stature alone is no longer able to protect them and their legacies from the anger of the youthful warriors of social media.

Dealing with Africa's Painful Memories

"Ever since the era of the pharaohs Africa has been coveted for its riches."[53] So starts Martin Meredith's 745-page book on *The Fortunes of Africa*. From the days of the Carthaginians through to the Greek and Roman Empires, to the times of the Portuguese explorers through to the German, Belgian, French, and British empires, Africa has tended to be viewed by Europeans as a place to be exploited for its great riches, real and imagined, and a place for cheap trade, including trade in human beings, otherwise known as slavery. Although the terms of trade between Africa with the Western and Arab worlds and now China have changed over time, the old tropes of conquest and exploitation have proven hard to overcome. Viewing the Congo as *un gâteau magnifique*, King Leopold of Belgium brooked no dissent in his pursuit of conquest and control of the riches of the Congo.[54] Similarly, the German Kaiser regarded Namibia as his own, so much so that when the Namibians dared to resist conquest, a genocidal onslaught against the Nama and the Herero – which nearly wiped them off the face of the earth – was carried out.[55]

But colonialization was not merely about the takeover of lands and commodities; it was about the takeover of bodies, minds, souls, spirits, religions, and spiritualities. Indeed, as noted by Ngugi wa T'hiongo,[56] the liberation of lands may be easier than the liberation of minds and souls. One hundred and twenty-one years later, Rudyard Kipling's portrayal of Filipinos (and

all colonized peoples including Africans) as "half-devil and half-child" in his poem "The White Man's Burden" has proven hard to jettison.[57] Nor have Africans been forgiven for the horrid descriptions and characterization afforded them in Joseph Conrad's fictional *The Heart of Darkness*, 120 years later:

> We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing, monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were – no, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly.[58]

"They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces," but they were not non-human! Apart from this double negative, what were they, "this wild and passionate uproar"? They may not have been non-human, but were they fully human? These, then, are the questions with which Black and African theologies must battle. For these and related reasons, Black and African theologians travel back and forth between Galatians 3:28 and the book of Exodus. If in Christ, there is neither gentile, Greek, nor Jew, are Africans included in that Pauline formula? Africans see themselves in the picture of Lazarus, the dogs licking his wounds, locked outside the gates of the homestead of the rich man.[59] When we hear of reports in which the leader of the Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, refers to "Moroccan scum" whose male members are sheer "testosterone bombs" needing to be locked up in refugee asylums, Black and African theologians hear the voice of Joseph Conrad all over again. When Frauke Perry, then leader of the Alternative für Deutschland, allegedly compared immigrants to a "heap of compost," we hear the echo of the voice of Rudyard Kipling referring to the peoples of the South as half-devil, half-child.

We can contrast the views ascribed to Perry and Wilders with those of Dr Paul Rohrbach, the commissioner for settlement in colonial Namibia, who encouraged his fellow Germans to go and settle in their newly acquired colony 120 years ago:

> It is not right either among the nations or among individuals that people who can create nothing should have a claim to preservation. No false philanthropy or race-theory can prove to reasonable people that the preservation of any tribe of nomadic South African Kaffirs . . . is more important for the future of mankind than the expansion of the great European nations, or the white race as a whole.[60]

One hundred years later, it would probably be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a Namibian to be admitted into German citizenship. Yet, less than 120 years ago, Germans were being encouraged to migrate to German South West Africa because such colonies "would become the incubators"[61] of true German-ness by helping to reconnect Germans to land and to reconnect with the rural and the pristine.

Doing Theology in a Context of Violence

Since democracy, South African violence has taken three major forms. The first is state violence, examples of which include the killing of Andries Tatane,[62] leader of a protest march for water and sanitation for a community; the killing of 34 miners on 16 August 2012 in Marikana[63] (with the total death toll reaching 44); the heavy-handedness with which the state

handled the students, #FeesMustFall protests[64] ; and the premature and preventable deaths of 143 mentally ill patients, otherwise known as the Life Healthcare Esidimeni Tragedy.[65] More recently, up to five people have died at the hands of the South African security force during the COVID-19 national lockdown.[66] We must include in this category the violence of poverty and the violence of the conditions in which the poor majority of South African citizens live. Indeed, South African state violence must be traced back to its colonial and apartheid history.

The second type of violence is xenophobic violence[67] against African foreign nationals,[68] virtually since the dawn of democracy but most notably since May 2008. In 2008, 62 lives were lost to xenophobic violence, including that horrendous burning to death of a Mozambican man, Ernesto Nhamuave,[69] at a slum named after current South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. A third of those killed in 2008 were South African. All of those killed were Black. Since then, incidents of xenophobic violence have become cyclical.

The third type of violence is the violence against women and children.[70] On 7 September 2019, as 19-year-old Bianca Andreescu was winning the US Tennis Open, South Africa was burying 19-year-old university student Uyinene Mrwetyana, who was raped and killed, her body burned beyond recognition, by a South African post office worker. In the first week of February 2013, a 17-year-old South African woman, Anene Booysen, was found fighting for her life in the streets of Bredasdorp, a small town outside Cape Town. She had been gang-raped, disembowelled, and left for dead. She succumbed to her injuries on the morning of 3 February 2013. During the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa, there has been a sharp rise in the number of incidents of violence against women in South Africa. In his lockdown address to the nation on 17 June 2020, President Ramaphosa included the following among the names of women who had been killed by men: Tshegofatso Pule, Naledi Phangindawo, Nompumelelo Tshaka, Nomfazi Gabada, Nwabisa Mgwandela, Altecia Kortjie, and Lindelwa Peni.[71] So, to the violence of war, repression, and militia groups all over the continent, we must add the high levels of peacetime violence inside many African countries – with South Africa being a potent example.

Nor should the violence be limited to the violence shown in the media. There is violence before the overt violence, violence during the violence, and violence after the violence. Theology in Africa cannot proceed without recognizing the extent to which the atmosphere is pregnant with violence – the structural violence, the wanton violence of the state, the violence in the streets, and the violence against women. Black and African theologies have to probe not just the causes but also the effects of violence on the faith of those who cannot avoid walking daily, up and down the dangerous Jericho roads in Africa, by virtue of their class, gender, nationality, and race.

The Theological Task at Hand

What does this mean for Black and African theologies and theologians?

First, despite speaking of hell, and violence, and shitholes, the impression must not be given that there is a shortage of agency or agentic actions among Africans. If that was the case, there would not have been an Arab Spring in North Africa, Abdelaziz Bouteflika would still be president of Algeria, Omar Al-Bashir would still be in charge of the Sudan, Mugabe might have remained president of Zimbabwe until he died, and #FeesMustFall protests could never have occurred in South Africa. And these are only the most obvious and the most public examples of the agency of African people. The duty of Black and African theologies is to

seek the face of God in these imperfect, messy stirrings of the human conscience. Indeed, Black, feminist, and African theologies are a type of African agency in the midst of dehumanizing conditions. For this reason, the suggestion of Dion Forster and others that Black, feminist, and African theologians must stop focusing on Africa, slavery, colonialism, and apartheid must be strongly rejected.

Second, Black and African theologies are about the humanity of the forgotten and the excluded people.

Third, Black and African theologies acknowledge the complicated, ironic, and tragic nature of Christian theology in Africa and in the world. That is to say, Christian theology is not and has never been a neutral observer in Africa. The starting point of Black and African theologies is to look for and to expose the "inside job" in the continuing theological, spiritual, and physical burglary of Africa. Global public theology may be one of such contemporary burglaries.

Fourth, postcolonial theology in Africa cannot proceed without taking seriously the continued and historic influence of African religions and traditions as past and present hosts of Christianity in Africa. To miss this reality would be to fail to understand the active agent in African Christianity. For a theology practised in the face of the current climate crisis, the pervasive violence between human beings, and between human beings and the environment, the insights of African cosmology are an invaluable treasure trove. No amount of evangelicalism and biblicism of the kind found in a few of the essays in Agang's African public theology will eviscerate the importance of African religion in African thought.

Fifth, the notion of *imago Dei* – the image of God – is a key theological category in Africa. It links up powerfully with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* – which puts human beings, their relationality, and their relationship with other creatures and the environment at the centre of life. It is on the basis of the *imago Dei* that racism, gender, and class discrimination are considered heretical and inimical to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sixth, Black and African theological and biblical hermeneutics are as important as the Bible. The attempt to set aside decades of work by African biblical scholars in the rush to parade the latest and newest theological fads – even if that fad is called African public theology – is not and will never be good enough.

Some Concluding Remarks

To conclude his book *Born from Lament*, Emmanuel Katongole tells the story of how on 20 October 2002, two Ugandan catechists, Daudi Okello and Jildo Ilwa from Gulu North, were canonized as martyrs by Pope John Paul II.[72] As the pope was signing their canonization documents, his pen ran out of ink, so he borrowed a pen from Archbishop Odama of Gulu to finish. Katongole concludes from this anecdote that perhaps the contribution of Christianity in Africa to global Christianity is one of providing ink, energy, and vitality to reinvigorate global Christianity during our times.

I disagree with Katongole's vision of the role of African Christianity in the world. In my view, the time has come for Christianity in Africa to not merely be a prop for European and American Christianity which masquerade as normative Christianity[73] and to not merely provide illustrations and anecdotes that prop up global public theology. Instead, the time has

come for Christianity in Africa to speak in its own name and to assert its right to be.[74] More importantly, the time has come for Black and African theologians to ask difficult questions about the complicity of Christianity and theology in the crisis the continent faces. Black, feminist, and African theologies have never been needed more. Taking my cue from poet Don Mattera,[75] I argue that the time has come for Africans to ask God some difficult questions.

If only we could meet man to man

You; stripped of power

And I of fear

I would lift my shirt

and show you scars

Wide as the moon

Black as the stars

If only we could meet

In the ghetto

In the street

You God; stripped of the power of death

And I of its fear

I would walk away from you

And I know that you

Would cry to have me back

Perhaps I would return

To wipe your eyes

For who wants

a God that cries

Notes

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